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ABSTRACT

Recent theory and research suggest that peer conflict contributes to children's development and represents an important form of social interaction. Research has identified structural features of children's conflict as issues, such as control of objects or physical space; strategies, including aggressive and nonaggressive physical and verbal tactics; and outcomes, such as an unresolved situation, an adult-imposed solution, one child's submission to another, or a mutually agreed-upon solution. Studies of children's conflicts indicate that age makes a difference in conflict resolution; the role of gender, however, is not as clear. Children's conflicts during play are influenced by the play setting, the children's prior relationships, and the presence of adults. Disputes are more likely to occur in closed than open play areas, children who were playing together before a conflict are more likely to resolve the conflict than children who were not playing together, and children more often generate their own solutions to conflicts when an adult is absent than when an adult is present. Implications for teachers and parents can be drawn from the research on children's conflicts. Teachers should: (1) be aware of children's intentions in an apparent conflict; (2) let children who are verbally competent try to resolve their conflict themselves; (3) note whether children were playing together before the conflict; (4) make play spaces accessible and provide ample play materials; and (5) help children, in conflicts characterized by physical strategies, to find words to use to express their feelings. (BC)

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Peer Conflicts in the Classroom

Edyth J. Wheeler

If teachers and parents learn to understand children's earliest peer conflicts, they will be in a better position to help young children break the current cycle of widespread violence. Traditionally, many adults have viewed conflicts between children as undesirable and have tried to prevent them or to intervene. Recent theory and research, however, suggest that peer conflict contributes to children's development and represents an important form of social interaction (Rende & Killen, 1992; Ross & Conant, 1992). Early childhood educators are beginning to focus on helping children develop conflict resolution strategies independent of adult intervention (Ramsey, 1991). Parents too can focus on helping their children develop such strategies.

The Structure of Children's Peer Conflicts

The structural features—the "anatomy"—of a conflict are usually described as issues, strategies, and outcomes (Ross & Conant, 1992). *Issues* include control of the physical or social environment, such as control of objects or physical space. Killen and Turiel (1991) categorize children's conflict as involving issues of morality (such as physical harm and individual rights) and of social order (such as rules for activities).

Conflict *strategies* include physical and verbal tactics that can be both aggressive and nonaggressive. Researchers concur that children's conflicts infrequently include aggression (Killen & Turiel, 1991). Nonaggressive physical strategies include taking a toy or entering a play space. Verbal strategies range from simple opposition to complex reasoning and negotiation. Children may use teasing and superiority of size, age, physical ability, or knowledge (Wilson, 1988) to establish control, or they may seek adult intervention to resolve a conflict. Killen and Turiel (1991) found, however, that children were capable of resolving conflicts on their own, and that adult intervention usually led to an adult-generated resolution.

The *outcomes* of a conflict may be (1) an unresolved situation, as when children simply drop the issue; (2) an adult-imposed solution; (3) the submission of one child to another; or (4) a mutually agreed-on solution achieved through bargaining, compromising, or finding alternate activities (Wilson, 1988).

Researchers have explored the relationships among the issues, strategies, and outcomes of children's conflicts. *Issues* often determine *strategies*. For example, object conflicts tend to involve physical resistance, although as children grow older, they begin to use verbal protest more frequently (Ross & Conant, 1992). Research also indicates that children's resolution *strategies* are related to the *outcomes* of their conflicts. Conciliatory behaviors are associated with peaceful outcomes and with continued interaction following the conflict. Physical domination often leads to ending the interaction.

In a study of 69 children in three preschools, Killen and Turiel (1991) found that, during peer group activity, more conflicts were unresolved than resolved; and among conflicts that were resolved, few resolutions were adult generated. In free play settings, adults resolved conflicts more frequently than children, including at least 60 percent of conflicts that involved physical harm and social order.

The Role of Age and Gender in Conflict

Studies of young children's conflicts indicate that age makes a difference in conflict resolution. Younger children are more often involved in object issues and use more physical strategies, while older children disagree over social issues and use more verbal negotiation and reasoning (Ross & Conant, 1992). In a study by Laursen and Hartup (1989), younger children used more conciliatory strategies in nonaggressive conflicts, while older children relied upon insistence. This and other studies suggest the possibility of a developmental sequence.

The role of gender in children's conflicts is not as clear as the role of age. According to some researchers, boys engage in more conflicts than girls and differ in their issues and strategies. Other researchers, however, have found no differences between girls and boys in issues, amount of conflict, or use of aggression (Laursen & Hartup, 1989).

Contexts of Children's Conflicts

Children's conflicts during play are influenced by the play setting, the children's prior relationship, and the presence of adults. Conflicts between children playing in isolated pairs differ from those between two children in a group setting. In a preschool classroom, for example, children have the option of walking away and finding a new activity. In pair play, however, children must persist in resolution efforts to continue to play (Killen & Turiel, 1991). Disputes are more likely to occur in closed play areas with a single entrance, suggesting that poor accessibility to play space may contribute to conflicts.

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A consistent finding in research is that children who were playing together before conflict were more likely to resolve their disputes and continue to play afterwards, and that they were more likely to disagree over play decisions than toy distribution (Rende & Killen, 1992), than children who were not playing together prior to a dispute. Laursen and Hartup (1989) found that children who engaged in cooperative play used less aggression in conflict than children who engaged in solitary or parallel play.

The presence of an adult changes the context of children's conflicts. Children take responsibility for their interactions and generate their own solutions more often when an adult is absent (Laursen & Hartup, 1989). Children's conflicts tend to be more aggressive when an adult is present (Killen & Turiel, 1991). When adults provide solutions, they sometimes make mistakes or are inconsistent or biased in the resolutions they impose. Such inconsistency and bias are especially true in parents' dealings with their own children's conflicts.

Implications for Teachers

A number of implications for teachers (and for parents) can be drawn from the research on children's conflicts.

- Teachers need to be aware of children's intentions. Is this conflict one that the children are truly trying to resolve, or is it verbal play? Teachers should help children make clear their own understanding of the conflict.
- Children's ability to resolve conflicts increases as their verbal competence and ability to take other perspectives grow. If the children involved in a dispute are verbal and empathetic, teachers should let them try to work things out themselves.
- Teachers' decisions to intervene should be made after they observe the issues of children's conflicts. Possession issues and name-calling generate less discussion than issues about facts or play decisions.
- Children who explain their actions to each other are likely to create their own solutions. In conflicts characterized by physical strategies and simple verbal oppositions, teachers should help children find more words to use.
- Teachers should note whether the children were playing together before the conflict. Prior interaction and friendship motivate children to resolve disputes on their own.
- Teachers can reduce the frustration of constant conflict by making play spaces accessible and providing ample materials for sharing.
- Children often rely on adults, who are frequently happy to supply a "fair" solution. Teachers should give children time to develop their own resolutions and allow them the choice of negotiating, changing the activity, dropping the issue, or creating new rules.
- Many conflicts do not involve aggression, and children are frequently able to resolve their disputes. Teachers should provide appropriate guidance, yet allow children to manage their own conflicts and resolutions.

Conclusion

Children's conflicts are complex social interactions, embracing a wide range of issues, strategies, and outcomes. These conflicts do not occur in a vacuum: the social and physical contexts are key elements. Studies have described much of what happens in children's conflicts and have identified aspects of children's conflicts that are interrelated. Researchers should continue to strive for an understanding of conflicts that will give children the means to create their own peaceful resolutions.

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For More Information

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